

## **Artful Racism and Artful Rape in BROKEN BLOSSOMS**

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from *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 26 (December 1981)

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Sexist and racist films and television programs continue to engage us as viewers, we women of all classes and races. The mass media catch us up in their violence and sensuality. As a woman I must ask how the media can so seduce me that I enjoy, either as entertainment or as art, works which victimize women as one of their essential ingredients. Historically from the silent film era to the present, bourgeois film has developed various mechanisms for structuring in ambiguity and for keeping us emotionally involved. One of film's hallmarks as a "democratic" art form is its ability to allow for and co-opt an oppressed group's response. Feminist film criticism takes as its task exposing these ideological mechanisms and analyzing how they function both internal to a film and in a broader cultural and political context.

### FAMILIAR SEXUAL TRAITS

Specifically, if we look closely at narrative films, with the intent of decolonizing our minds, we will find a similar "story" about sexual relations running below many films' surface. Over and over again, male and female film characters are assigned a popularly familiar configuration of sexual traits.<sup>1</sup> This constellation of recognizable sexual traits provides mass art a way to express the culture's commonly held sexual fantasies. The way these fantasies are expressed varies, of course, from film to film, where they are manipulated and often displaced (e.g., in "doubles" or in *Others*) or condensed according to the exigencies of the plot and/or the social acceptability of directly expressing a given fantasy.<sup>2</sup>

Strikingly, the same kind of sexual-political "story," or assignation of sexual traits, is repeated from film to film, no matter how much the manifest content differs between films. This repetition is not ideologically neutral. Persistent configurations of assigned sexual traits, deriving perhaps most directly from 19th and 20th century literature, have a vitality in contemporary film because these patterns emerge from and serve to reinforce patriarchal social relations in the world outside the film.<sup>3</sup> Fictional sexuality parallels the real options that hegemonic male culture would like to keep on offering men and women today, and real power differentials between the sexes. In terms of the emotional options for both men and women that the cinematic configurations of sexual traits present and delimit, patterns of characterization are, in fact, usually oppressively perverse.

### *BROKEN BLOSSOMS*

In this context, that of durable yet perverse sexual-political structures in film, it is useful to look at one of the first films in the United States that was received as high art and as a

progressive and emotionally moving statement against both masculine brutality and racial prejudice: D.W. Griffith's BROKEN BLOSSOMS. The film was released in 1919 and was one of a number of poetic and intimate depictions of domestic life which followed Griffith's monumental epics of 1915-16, BIRTH OF A NATION and INTOLERANCE.

BIRTH OF A NATION, originally entitled THE CLANSMAN, had valorized the founding of the Ku Klux Klan, depicting it as a paternalistic, semi-feudal organization bringing order to a South suffering under the "chaos" of Reconstruction. Consequently, the film provoked a national scandal because of its racist content. Griffith's cinematic rejoinder to the charges against him, BROKEN BLOSSOMS, deliberately tried to counter the then dominant racist ways of depicting Asians in popular literature, magazines, and film. In reaction to the importation of masses of Asian laborers and congruent with U.S. imperial ambitions in the Pacific, the United States had seen waves of anti-Oriental" prejudice in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Newspapers sensationalized editorialized on and presented stories about the "yellow peril." Fictional narratives often used "inscrutable Orientals" as villains, or located vices such as drug addiction or white slavery in a U.S. Chinatown. In the decade before BROKEN BLOSSOMS, films treated what seemed the most dangerous threat of all, "miscegenation."<sup>4</sup>

It is within this context that BROKEN BLOSSOMS was perceived as a sensitive and humanitarian film. It daringly presented a chaste and ideally beautiful love between an immigrant Chinese man and a young white girl. The plot of the film was derived from Thomas Burke's short story, The Chink and the Girl," from his *Limehouse Nights*, tales of lumpen criminal life. Griffith changed Burke's Chinese protagonist from a schemer and "worthless drifter of an Oriental" to a poetic, peaceful Buddhist lover of beauty.<sup>5</sup> Ostensibly BROKEN BLOSSOMS has a moral message: Asian Buddhist peacefulness is superior to Anglo-Saxon ignorance, brutality and strife.

Griffith embodies his moral message in his two male protagonists, a gentle Chinese storekeeper in London's Limehouse slum district, played by Richard Barthelmess, and a working-class brute there, Battling Burrows. Played by the large-framed, muscular actor Donald Crisp, Burrows prides himself on his masculine prowess. He is master both in the boxing ring and at home, where he bullies his housekeeper and daughter, the fifteen-year-old Lucy. Lucy, played by Lillian Gish, is a poverty-stricken, beaten child who awakens for one brief moment to emotional life before she is killed.

The plot of the film is simple. The film opens in a Chinese port city with Barthelmess in his ornate robes saying goodbye to his Buddhist mentor and then trying unsuccessfully to break up a fight between brawling U.S. sailors; the Chinese man is going to the West to bring a message of peace. The setting shifts to a London Limehouse slum, where we find out that the young Chinese man has become a lonely, disillusioned shopkeeper and opium addict. Elsewhere in the slum, Battling Burrows sits in his shack reminiscing about a fight he has just won and is reprimanded by his manager for drinking and womanizing before his next fight.

Burrows' daughter Lucy is introduced, sitting huddled on a coil of rope on the wharf outside their house. (As Charles Affron points out in *Star Acting*, all the sets in this film are claustrophobic, even the outdoor ones. Departing from the epic scope of *BIRTH OF A NATION*, *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* formally accepts and uses the edge of the frame as limiting the scope of the action and incorporates many other boundaries such as walls, arches, and corners within the frame to enhance a claustrophobic effect.<sup>6</sup> Two sequences, indicating Lucy's reverie or perhaps moments recently experienced, present Lucy's "education" about women's lives. First, a woman in a crowded one-room apartment who is cooking a meal for her huge family and fighting with her husband advises Lucy never to get married. Then Lucy is seen on the street retrieving a compact dropped by one of two prostitutes, who also warn her about men. Lucy gets up and enters the shack.

Still smarting from his manager's rebuke, Burrows bullies Lucy. Before he goes out on the town again, he demands that she have tea ready when he gets back and also that she put a smile on her face. Lucy makes a pathetic gesture, using her fingers to turn up the corners of her mouth--it is a gesture she will repeat four times in the film.

In Burrows' absence, Lucy takes out a few treasures from under a brick on the floor, puts a new ribbon in her dirty hair, and goes out to shop. She looks longingly at the dolls in the Chinese man's shop window, buys a few essentials from a street stand, and wants to trade in some tinfoil to buy a flower but does not have enough foil. She is harassed on the street by another Chinese man, Evil Eye, but is protected by Barthelmess. When she goes home, her father, irritated by his manager's restrictions on his social life, bullies her. In nervousness, she drops hot food on his hand. Burrows angrily takes out a whip from under the bed and beats her unconscious. He then goes out to work out in the gym preparing for his big fight.

Lucy staggers to her feet, leaves the house, and weaves down the Limehouse streets. She falls unconscious through the door of the Chinese man's store. He has prepared himself an opium pipe and sits and gazes at her as if she were a vision in his drugged dream. She stirs and startles him into full awareness. He bathes her wounds, takes her upstairs to his living quarters, gives her his Oriental robe to wear, and puts her on his bed as on an altar. He surrounds her with all his beautiful things, gives her a doll, and is sexually attracted to her. As he moves to kiss her, he sees her fear and kisses the sleeve of her robe instead. Intercut with this sequence are shots of Burrows slugging it out and winning his big fight amidst the wild cheers of a working-class male audience.

One of Burrows' friends while shopping at the Chinese man's store discovers Lucy alone asleep upstairs and runs to tell Burrows of the daughter's "sin." The boxer and his friends agree to wait till after the big fight to settle the affair. When they get to the store, the Chinese man is away on an errand. Burrows hits his daughter, forces her to change back into her rags and come with him, and destroys everything in the upstairs room. His friends downstairs keep Lucy from escaping.

Once back at home, Burrows chases Lucy, who takes refuge in the closet. When she refuses to come out, Burrows smashes in the closet door with an ax; this sequence is

shot from inside the closet, showing Lucy's hysterical reaction and absolute fear. The claustrophobic visual composition and Gish's acting indicate that we are intended to be "inside" Lucy's experience in this cinematic equivalent of rape. When Burrows chops through the door, he pulls Lucy through it and throws her on the bed, where he beats her to death.

Upon discovering the destruction in his room and Lucy's abduction, the Chinese man throws himself on the floor and sobs hysterically. He takes a gun, goes to Burrows' shack, finds Lucy dead, acknowledges the challenge Burrows gives him to fight, and shoots and kills the evil brute. Taking Lucy's body with him, the Chinese man goes back to his room and lays her body once again on his bed as on an altar. Burrows' friends discover the boxer's body and get the police to round up the Asian killer. Before they can do so, in a last act of tranquil and sorrowful love, even ecstasy, the "yellow man" praying before his Buddha stabs himself and joins his child-woman in death. This is the "plot" of BROKEN BLOSSOMS.

### THE ABUSES OF MASCULINITY

If we analyze the story line more closely, looking particularly at the visual elements and cinematic tactics used to present it, it will become clear that the film is *about* sex roles as much as it is *about* race. In particular, it is about masculinity. In the figure of Battling Burrows, the film presents the potential evil of masculinity, here safety attributed to a grotesque Other from the lower classes. Projected onto the Chinese man's character are all the traits of the 19th century sensitive outsider, the romantic hero--a self-destructive dreamer who never lives out the fulfillment of his dreams. I wish to examine how and why such traits have been divided and assigned to the two major male characters in the film, and also what it means that the narrative places both men in relation to a "virgin." Finally I wish to look at the kind of role assigned to Lillian Gish and Gish's impact on/atraction for me as a woman viewer both drawn to and distressed by this film.

In BROKEN BLOSSOMS, if we look closely at the gestures, the clothing, and the course of events in any given sequence, we will see that our interpretation of the characters' behavior relies on and indeed underscores many popular notions about what masculinity and the abuses of masculinity are. As Donald Crisp plays Battling Burrows, he uses exaggeration to delineate the attributes of a working-class bully and macho brute. Burrows carries the traditional attributes of masculinity to an abusive extreme. In contrast, Barthelmess plays the Chinese man as being in many ways not fully a man, as woman-like. Compare, for example, our judgments on the costumes and gestures of the two men as we first see them. We notice the ornateness of Barthelmess' robe, his facial gestures, especially his looking upward with half-closed eyes, his carrying a fan, his small movements, and his semi-static poses and stance.

The opening titles and the choice of content in the film's early shots would seem to indicate that the initial contrast between a port in the Far East and a Limehouse slum is intended to emphasize a social and moral point, namely that Asian civilization and altruism outshine European and American immorality and grossness. Yet another set of reflections are simultaneously elicited from the audience--an evaluation and

comparison of effeminacy vs. brute manliness. In his scripted role and in the connotations borne by his figure, Barthelmess as the Chinese man seems to elicit from the audience a common social accusation: that of effeminacy. That is, time and time again, the viewer seems led to conclude, "That's an effeminate man--or effeminate gesture, or article of clothing, etc." The young Asian man's robe is excessively ornate; in the exterior shots, its skirts conspicuously blow in the wind. It is shapeless, making the shape beneath it androgynous in form. When he is in the Buddhist temple with his mentor, the temple itself filled with flowers, exotica, and ornate design, Barthelmess acts "girl-like"--holding a fan, moving only with slight restrained gestures, and standing with eyes cast down.

In contrast to the Chinese man's demeanor, we are also presented in these sequences with men self-consciously proud of their masculinity, the U.S. sailors whom Griffith calls in one intertitle, "barbarous Anglo-Saxon sons of turmoil and strife." They swizzle down liquor, stuff food grotesquely into their mouths, make large gestures, swagger around as ugly Americans totally insensitive to their milieu, and seem incapable of being together without violent physical discord. They foreshadow Griffith's critique of Battling Burrows.

In the Limehouse environment, we first see the Chinese man huddled against a wall, one foot up against it, arms wrapped around himself, eyes cast sadly down. The soft curve of Barthelmess' body seems to "catch" the contrasting, harsh linear angles of the architecture against which he is posed, and for a man to have his arms wrapped around himself is to assume a typical "woman's" gesture of depression, insecurity, and even sad self-hatred. As he is introduced to us in his Limehouse environment, the Chinese man takes a stance which is as far from that of a masculine doer, a self-determining agent of one's own life, as it is possible to present. In his store we see him semi-statically posed smoking his opium against a background of meager beauty, that life he could create for himself being one of melancholy, contemplation and escape.

The opium den which the Chinese man goes to suggests not only moral but sexual derangement. As a matter of fact, fictional films usually "signal" moral derangement by showing us women in sexually transgressive roles. Here, we see mannishly dressed women in sexually active poses or in compositions of sexual self-sufficiency or dominance, often with a man of another race. In one composition, an Anglo woman is sitting higher than and looking down on a totally self-absorbed, opium-smoking Turk; another shot shows a blonde woman interacting with a Black worker, another, an Anglo woman flirting with a Chinese man we later know as Evil Eye.

We see a woman lying on a couch, filmed either as if she wishes to seduce someone or as if the opium were giving her an orgasmic experience on her own. She is panting slightly, wetting her lips, and looking toward the camera with an expression that suggests illicit ecstasy. This shot parallels a later one of Barthelmess stretched out full length on a couch, with the opium seller tending this completely passive figure. The equation of the protagonist's vice with sexual derangement and here, with a suspiciously feminine passivity, could not be more explicit.

In contrast, the figure of Battling Burrows is a study in established norms of masculine dress, gesture, attitudes, and behavior. Every aspect of Burrows' character is heightened so as to make us reflect on the falsity or brutal consequences of those norms. What do we see Burrows doing? In the ring he fights strictly by heavy slugging. After winning, he is proud and struts about. Before the fight he makes faces at his off-screen opponent, juts his chin out, and pounds his gloves up and down on his legs-- indicating that he thinks a fight will clearly prove to the whole world who is the "better man."

Back home, he drinks and entertains the advances of a Loose Woman. The signs of her looseness are her activity, her smiling, her friendliness, and her initiative to visit a man in his house. She walks in, hands in her pockets, looks Burrows in the eye, immediately moves over to where he is standing, receives a quick embrace from him, and then goes back out, still looking at him with a flirting look in her eye, presumably having made a date to meet him later.

Burrows' typical posture asserts macho self-confidence in a socially coded way, particularly in terms of cinematic gestures assigned to figures supposedly from the working class. He stands with feet spread apart, lets his eyes sweep around the room possessively, pulls his vest down, puts his hands in his pockets to pull his pants tight across his crotch, and sways back and forth from one foot to another. Such a stance is a way of declaring himself master of a given space, and especially master over the woman in his domestic space.

When angry, Burrows knocks one fist against the palm of the other hand, and when proclaiming his opinion, he gestures with his hand open and palm down. Although he is characterized as stupid, he is also shown as having the prerogative of having his emotions and opinions respected as law in his house--a witty cinematic comment on just where it is that all of us can observe patriarchy as insane, i.e., within the nuclear family.[Z](#) To portray this man's physical excess, which culminates in his beating his daughter, Griffith has Burrows pick up the chair and swing it around, eat like a pig, throw a spoon at Lucy's rear end, and then oblige her to smile--upon which pathetic act he passes judgment. There are many such gestures of dominance toward Lucy before Burrows beats her. Indeed, all of Burrows' gestures in the film seem to form part of a brutal whole.

Burrows' male friends reinforce for him the rightness of his behavior and attitudes. They form a Boys' Club, something all socially successful men partake of and use to protect their men's rights in a man's world. When the men go to the police station to report Burrows' death, the police's cooperative interaction with them reveals an unusual degree of male cohesiveness, for in another context we might expect more of a conflict to be presented between the police and the fight-loving element of a portside slum. The conflicts which Burrows' associates do have function well within the parameters of the boys' club, for the manager only wants the fighter to fight better; and the associates band together to get the woman back for their friend once the joke of telling him about it has been sprung.

In fact, the tale was told to Burrows just as if it were a spicy story of local adultery; the man who had spied on Lucy paced his account to Burrows to arouse Burrows' sexual curiosity, laughter, and contempt for any cuckolded man who would lose a woman to a weakling and a "Chink." In a competitive fashion, his friends found it great fun to see the boxer's chagrin at "losing" both to a girl, his own daughter whom he was supposed firmly to possess, and to a man who seemed Burrows' inferior because that man would not fight and because he was of another race. There is no love between Burrows and his associates but a lot of mutual self-protection, and when they "recover" Lucy, they all assume that Burrows would and should beat her both to assuage his wounded masculine pride and to put her firmly in her place.

#### POSSESSING A VIRGIN AND A CHILD

Certain perversities in the film are labeled as such by the intertitles and the story line: namely, racism, opium addiction, and physical violence. Yet there are other perversities equally important to the development of the whole film: these are rape, incest, and the seduction of a child. It is testimony to the force of the intertitles and the declared narrative line--the overt story of racism and child abuse--that few critics have looked closely at the specifically sexual perversity of this film.<sup>8</sup> In fact, if we look at the mise-en-scene and composition, in visual terms it is clear that both the brutish father and the gentle, dope-smoking Chinese man "get" the girl. Visually we see both men symbolically consummating sexual contact with Gish. The film allows both men to possess a virgin, indeed, a child.

It seems clear beyond the need for any more elaboration here that Burrows' breaking into the closet with an ax and dragging the cowering Lucy out between the broken boards visually symbolizes rape; indeed, this is one of the most emotionally powerful sequences of sexual assault on film. Yet there are many other indications in the film that Burrows' relation to his daughter is a sexual one. He abuses her for the same reasons and in the same way that a working-class man is supposed to abuse his wife. That is, when the world is down on you, if you are a married man you can always take it out on the wife and kids at home. Aside from one intertitle introducing Lucy, there is no other indication of a father-daughter relation, and all of Burrows' actions toward Lucy would appropriately be those of a man toward a wife.

More explicit in establishing a sexual connotation in Burrows' relation to Lucy is the role of the bed in the visual composition and mise-en-scene. Sometimes, especially when Burrows is alone drinking or with his manager, the composition is toward the room's center, with the bed predominantly visible behind Burrows. When Lucy is alone in the house doing her domestic chores, looking at her treasures, or looking in the mirror, the composition is toward the right side of the room, the domestic corner that includes the hearth. On the opposite side, the bed and closet form an angle, which compositionally becomes a trap.

The first time Burrows beats Lucy, he grabs a whip from under the mattress and stands in the center of the room, holding the whip at penis height. The lighted areas in the composition form a triangle, with the pillow and Lucy's and Burrows' faces forming the

triangle's corners, and the whip-phallus aligned midway between the pillow and Lucy's face. Lucy cries, cowers by the door, and clings to the far right wall away from the bed. Burrows is filmed in a symmetrically composed medium-shot, whip prominently in the center, and he points for her to move away from the right wall, that is, toward the direction of the bed. Lucy tries to create a diversion by telling him there is dust on his shoes and bends down to wipe off his shoes with her dress. Here, the change in composition from one shot to another connotes the act of fellatio. In the long shot before Lucy wipes the shoes, the whip hangs almost to the floor, but in the close-up of her wiping the shoes, the whip's tail is now at the height of Burrows' penis, and as Lucy raises her face the whip swings past her lips. As Burrows grabs Lucy's arms and throws her toward the bed near the closet, the whip is again between his legs at penis height. We see blurred, orgiastic shots of him beating her senseless. In the final beating sequence, the same connotative devices are repeated, but in a more exaggerated way. Burrows beats Lucy's face with the phallus-like whip handle, and the site of her death is actually on the bed.

Finally, the way Burrows dies emphasizes that his relation to the Chinese man was one of sexual competition after all. When the Chinese man discovers the dead Lucy on the bed and is about to shoot Burrows, both men face off and tacitly acknowledge the other's "manly" challenge that they will fight to the death over the "cause" of this woman. Posed next to a fight poster on the wall and standing with his back to the angle formed by the bed and closet (which was the trap-like locus of Lucy's rape and death), the Chinese man shoots Burrows, discharging the gun when it is held at penis-height.

In paradigmatic contrast to sexual violence is the sensual completeness of Lucy's one night at the Chinese man's home. And yet that relation is not only tender and beautiful, but it is also explicitly perverse. We can see this most clearly in the sequence where the Chinese man overcomes his lust just after the girl Lucy has received her first doll. Lucy, wrapped in her new protector's ornate, "womanly" Oriental robe, cuddles the doll with delight. However, her friend with the gentle eyes now wears a look of acquisitive passion, and he is seen moving in on Lucy, his eyes in shadow. Intercut with this sequence are shots of Burrows at his big fight; we see Burrows slugging heavily and an all-male audience, primarily working class, on their feet wildly cheering. When we see the Chinese man and Lucy again, there is fear in her eyes as she clings to the doll. He picks up the hem of her sleeve and kisses that instead, his face moving to the light where we see his illuminated, gentle, ecstatic smile as he goes away.

Significantly overapologizing for the man's sexual intent, the intertitle announces: "His love remains a pure and holy thing--even his worst foe says this." In fact, the title makes no sense, because no one at the time knew that Lucy was there, and later her father and his friends just assumed that a sexual relation had been effected.

Griffith seems to use the title to deny the sequence's visual explicitness, yet this very denial creates suspicion about and thus confirms the reality of that sexual passion which the sequence has both presented and repressed. After the Chinese man withdraws, we see Gish examining the sleeve that had been kissed and then stirring in bed. Both gestures indicate the child's emotional, indeed sexual, involvement with this gentle yet

seductive man. The visual lushness of this sequence, the child's gestures of preening and of loving the doll, the advances of the Chinese man, and the child's awakening to both maternal and sexual emotion--all these visual details offer a clear erotic message, a message which is then ambiguously denied.

## MEN'S OPTIONS UNDER CAPITALISM

Two men, a brute and an effeminate beauty-lover, "get a virgin." That is what I see as the sexual plot of BROKEN BLOSSOMS. What does that mean? What is the power of such a plot? Why did Griffith construct his story that way? First of all, their slum environment, brutality, and opium smoking cast the male protagonists as Others. Griffith safely assigns perversity to other races and to the poor. Onto the working class are displaced Griffith's unconscious, artistic insights about the problems of the nuclear family under capitalism, an understanding he never could have admitted to since he was very much the patriarch, a man who fondly recalled the paternalistic and militaristic values of the Old South and who always had a loving eye for pretty young women.[9](#)

In fact, the film presents two key moments of men's lives under capitalism. A man can be socially successful and conventionally masculine, or he can cultivate his sensitivity and imaginative capacity and live as an outsider. Since the last century, middle-class men have had as a model of emotional success either being the "breadwinner" and thus possessor of a home, wife, and family or of being a "free-spirited" (in fact, petit-bourgeois) rebel, usually an artist or intellectual.

BROKEN BLOSSOMS utilizes and heightens this contrast between these two emotional options traditionally open to middle-class men. It reduces the outlines of these two kinds of male roles to a schematized emblematic form, and it displaces the whole "problem" of masculinity onto a story about the lives of the very poor. The film is thus particularly useful to us as feminist critics to show how popular art transmits patriarchal assumptions, for the roles of the two major male characters not only set out two contrasting sides of a single sexual-political configuration, but the film also makes the emotional implications of each kind of role totally explicit.

The figure of Burrows represents conventional notions of masculinity as enacted by a socially successful man. Within that formula, the corollary to a "real man's" aggressively taking what he can in the social and economic world is his "wearing the pants" at home. That is, he is the boss or the possessor of a wife and family, and his woman must always know her place. In BROKEN BLOSSOMS, Battling Burrows seemingly has no wife, only a daughter. Yet in the figure of Lucy are condensed multiple notions of women's servitude, dependency and helplessness, and reception of sexual abuse.

Women's role in the nuclear family under capitalism was classically described by Frederick Engels using the metaphor of prostitution.[10](#) Across class lines and cultures and across historical periods, we have sold our bodies for sustenance. Furthermore, the ideological compensations given to "good" women in Western culture--the romantic love myth and the courtly "woman- on-a-pedestal" or Victorian "wife-as-moral-focus" myth--are, as Kate Millett wrote,

"grants which the male concedes out of his total power. Both have the effect of obscuring the patriarchal character of Western culture and, in their general tendency to attribute impossible virtues to women, have ended by confining them in a narrow and often remarkably constricted sphere of behavior."[11](#)

Symbolically, in BROKEN BLOSSOMS, Lucy functions as the Good Wife. But what is most daring about this film is that it pushes Engels' metaphor of prostitution, used to describe the way women are possessed in the nuclear family, one step further. BROKEN BLOSSOMS' metaphor equates the possession of women in the family with incest. Many works of literature especially from the 19th century on deal with the relation of father-figures and sons as the sons come into their patrimony or make it as self-made men, and this has been a favorite theme in contemporary film (THE APPRENTICESHIP OF DUDDY KRAVITZ, STAR WARS, and THE GODFATHER immediately come to mind).

But this film is unusual in the way it faces the opposite question, not the coming into patrimony but the servitude of women, a servitude enforced by threats of deprivation emotional bullying, and the potential or actual use of physical force. In BROKEN BLOSSOMS the father rapes his daughter--what does that mean? In Burrows' case, murdering Lucy is clearly the ultimate abuse of his prideful masculinity. In real life, we know that on the individual level rape is not an act of sexual desire but one of possession.[12](#) And on the social level, as Susan Brownmiller points out, rape is analogous to lynching; it is an act supposedly committed by lumpen proletarian men or a crazy few, but in fact rape performs a more general social function as a reminder and brutal enforcer of women's "place."[13](#)

When we take the second half of the term, "the father rapes his daughter," and ask what *incest* means to the sexual-political structure underlying the film, we arrive at the same answer--*possession*. The challenge to patriarchy that this film poses (or can pose through a feminist reading) is the following: If a man's social world consists primarily of a boys' club, of a nexus of economic and power relations conducted principally among men, how can a man ever set his daughters free or even conceive of what their freedom might mean? For the emotional implication BROKEN BLOSSOMS dares to draw out is that for a man to be the possessor at home means to be incestuous toward his girl children as well as toward his wife.[14](#)

Griffith is perfectly clear about Burrows' excesses and morally righteous in disliking abusive masculinity, here safely assigned to the working class. We all see what Burrows is like and know why the brute is wrong. More interesting to me, and more ambiguous, is Burrows' complement, the Chinese man. On the superficial level, the film is an antiracist text, but the film says nothing from an Asian person's point of view, just as it says nothing from a woman's point of view. The images of the East, of Buddhism, of racial traits, and of an oppressed person's reaction to oppression are all drawn from hegemonic, white stereotypes. In fact, not only is Griffith working only with received opinions and prejudices about Asians, women, and the working class, but when he sets up his basic opposition of brute vs. sensitive man, he is working with a set of oppositions that have nothing to do with race.

## THE MAN OF ACTION VS. THE SENSITIVE OUTSIDER

What are these oppositions set up by the use of two contrasting male figures--the boxer and the opium smoker? The one character is a violent, selfish, insensitive man of action. Burrows moves with large gestures and commands a large space wherever he is. He is self-assured and demanding, even to the point of being physically and emotionally destructive to others around him. The other male figure in the film is a gentle, altruistic lover of beauty. He is a soft person, often emotionally paralyzed into inaction. He burns up his days in reverie and opium. But even though he would waste himself with drugs, he is basically fatherly and tender, totally self-sacrificing for a child-woman that he would wish to, but cannot, possess. Furthermore, he understands the hypocrisy of most social values in the capitalist West, his solution to that is to surround his own life with beauty and otherwise to withdraw. In his love life, the yearning is all.

The character whom Griffith can demean by calling "Chinky" has all the traits of a male cultural persona which has been valorized in Western literature for several centuries now--a persona Griffith himself surely must have identified with. "Chinky" is no less than our old friend, the romantic hero. He is the sensitive lover of beauty and the pursuer of unattainable women. The Chinese man could have stepped right out of Thomas DeQuincy's *The Opium Eater*, and it is indeed likely that the author of *Limehouse Nights* was influenced by DeQuincy's depiction of London poverty and a young man's opium addiction and friendship with a girl waif.

That Griffith, the artist who always thought of himself and his role in idealized terms, identified with the Chinese man can be seen in the way that BROKEN BLOSSOM's plot and mise-en-scene constantly valorize the young man's tenderness, aesthetic sensibility, and moral superiority. Indeed, all the Chinese man's virtues are conflated in a romantic way: to recognize beauty and to surround oneself with beautiful things are indices of moral superiority that those enmeshed in the workaday world do not recognize. Only artists, fellow outsiders, and women can recognize such a virtue for its worth.

To carry my analysis of sexual politics in BROKEN BLOSSOMS one step further, I think we should ask why this figure is characteristically male and what his social role is. In fact, the romantic hero and the sensitive outsider (or, to use a more familiar equivalent, the filmmaker and the professors of literature and film)--these people have a specific class position under capitalism; their chance to *choose* that position is the escape valve that capitalism allows for dissatisfied male members of its petite bourgeoisie. To put it schematically, there are three roles available to men in capitalist society--to be an outsider, a worker, or a boss.

If you pursue profit and power, you also exploit others. To avoid facing that, you have to dull your emotional sensibility as you move up in social position. That is what DUDDY KRAVITZ, GODFATHER II, and ROOM AT THE TOP are all about. The capitalist has to believe that the profit motive serves society the best and cannot look with regret either at how he is exploiting others or at how his emotional and social forms of interacting with others might be better. Possession and dominance become embedded in a way of life.

Or a man may be a worker, putting in time at a stultifying job for a weekly paycheck, suffering humiliation both from superiors at work and from the threat of unemployment and/or illness--the threat of not being able to take care of one's own. For both male workers and bosses, most of whom are male, there are many reasons why men continue to suffer from rigid notions of sex roles, emotional paralysis, moral compromise, and a crippling of the imagination--and also why they oppress women.

The one "out" that has traditionally been offered to men since the last century has been to be the artist, the outsider, the rebel. This person has the insight and the inner drive to reject social respectability and emotional sterility. He can turn to creating art, living alone in nature, or taking drugs--often doing all these at once. Instead of pursuing money, success, and power in bourgeois terms, the romantic hero idealistically lives by virtues that seem to be precluded if one searches for social success: these virtues include creativity, passion, love, authenticity, honesty, sincerity, beauty, innocence, spontaneity, and contemplation of nature. At the same time, the romantic hero in his self-gazing is also like Hamlet, often paralyzed into inaction, usually ineffective, yearning for the unattainable woman, and inevitably self-destructive. That this is a male role can be seen from the fact that the rebel goes off to the woods or into drugs, but not back into the domestic sphere to raise small children. That has just not been one of the options that men have commonly imagined for themselves.[15](#)

## DISPLACEMENT

Furthermore, Griffith's "ruse" of using the Asian man as the romantic hero hides the social reality of racism. The romantic hero is more like Griffith's image of himself; Griffith wrote that he sought to live by the pen as a way of identifying with his earlier and most beloved image of his father, that is, of a man brandishing a sword (and in fact, it was brandishing a sword against a Black servant to teach the man his place).[16](#) When Griffith came of age in the South, the illustrious days of the Civil War and family prosperity were for him sadly a part of the legendary past. To be a writer was for Griffith to find a more modern, petit bourgeois way of being a real man in a culture not instinctively his own, of being socially functional yet still maintaining his felt identity as an Outsider, and of devoting himself to Creativity and Art.[17](#)

Perhaps reacting against the charges of racism which BIRTH OF A NATION had provoked, Griffith clearly wanted BROKEN BLOSSOMS to be considered anti-racist, but the film represses all understanding of the real mechanisms of racism. Griffith did not embed his depiction of doomed interracial love within an artistic structure that would clarify our understanding of race and racial oppression. Instead, he assigned to the Asian man the traits of his own class, that element of the petite bourgeoisie who feel themselves as individuals to be above economic and social constraints--sensitive outsiders morally superior to the bosses and brutes.

If the artistic structure of BROKEN BLOSSOMS deals only superficially with race, it deals profoundly with sexual politics, especially masculinity. In particular, it implies that all three "types" of men under capitalism will desire the same type of woman--the unattainable woman or nonsexually active one.[18](#) Battling Burrows represents the

"family man." Because he is an entrepreneur, an aggressive boxer, he represents the self-made man, and because of his economic level, he also represents the working class. Thus Griffith has condensed onto the figure of Burrows traits of both the capitalist and the worker. In this context, Burrows possesses his blonde virgin and good wife and child within the context of a man's possession of his family. As I mentioned before, Griffith condensed and displaced all his notions of the potential evil of family life onto the figure of a lower class man both for his own protection and that of his audience. Similarly, projected onto the figure of the Chinese man are all the traits of the romantic hero, living only for the pursuit and never living out the fulfillment.

The woman that both men need, each for different reasons, is played by Gish in a way that collapses virgin, child, and wife all into the same role. For the father, she is the traditional good woman and also the virgin child. For the Chinese romantic hero, she is like Faust's Gretchen and DeQuincy's waif or even Werther's Lotte--a figure desirable from afar.

When I first saw BROKEN BLOSSOMS, I asked myself, what does it mean that both men have to get a virgin? Griffith's emblematic schema of the sexual possibilities for men in the West, that is, under capitalism, makes the answer clear. The men in the film live in a world of men, and Burrows embraces that world while the Chinese rejects it. None of the men in the film can enter into or even imagine a world where women are sexually active, initiators and agents of actions and decisions, and bearers of social power.

Coming to the same conclusion, but in a contrasting way, G.W. Pabst's silent film PANDORA'S BOX also took up the theme of the capitalist's and the romantic hero's sexual decisions, but that film traced the fate of two men who aligned themselves with the seductress, the dark woman. Lulu, played by the dark-haired Louise Brooks, was the mirror opposite of Gish--a destroyer of men and the bearer of chaos. In BROKEN BLOSSOMS, the function of the good woman, the virginal woman, is to be put on a pedestal and yearned for, and after marriage or within the family, she is to be possessed. It is not Lucy's own vision, for Griffith early included scenes which showed Lucy losing all illusions about her future as a woman, either in marriage or as a prostitute.

That all the main characters must die at the end of BROKEN BLOSSOMS and that the sexual-political situation as Griffith presents it is so static and despairing is no accident. Griffith presents a sparse yet emotionally charged outline of what happens when men cling to established norms of masculinity or rebel against those norms as a romantic hero would. BROKEN BLOSSOMS has the vision to present both kinds of emotional possibilities which men in capitalist culture can allow themselves as, at worst, murderous in their consequences, and, at best, as crippling to men and oppressive to women.

#### A WOMAN VIEWER'S RESPONSE

To conclude, I would like to try to analyze why I liked the film. First, as I pointed out, Griffith's films have many ways to pacify our superego while promulgating a racist and

sexist ideology. BROKEN BLOSSOMS' intent seems to be to combat racism. The fact that the Chinese man has the outlook of the romantic hero more than the point of view of someone from a non-white race does not at first seem racist, since the romantic hero has long been a figure women have found sympathetic. Sheila Rowbotham in *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* spoke for my whole generation when she exposed the basic infantile selfishness of that figure as encountered by women in real life, but even so the sensitive, often androgynous man in fiction still has his appeal. Men authors give him "womanly" virtues and also a man's right to be agent of his own destiny. BROKEN BLOSSOMS takes a clear stand against violence and male brutality, and, in the figure of the Chinese man, it valorizes male tenderness, gentleness, and appreciation of beauty and innocence. No matter how many times I see the film, its simple praise for virtues I too prize in men comes through with an emotional power.

For most viewers, the other side of that message, that Brutality is Wrong, is conveyed not through the caricature of masculinity as enacted by Donald Crisp as Battling Burrows but through the pathos elicited by Lillian Gish. BROKEN BLOSSOMS established Gish's critical reputation and was part of a series of films Griffith made in this period which looked lovingly at the small detail and at Woman in the domestic sphere. Griffith's films were famous for their female roles, and Griffith was admired for the performances he drew from actresses and the way he filmed them. BROKEN BLOSSOMS, for example, featured Griffith's first use of the irregular "Sartov" lens, which resulted in his dramatically exploiting from then on softly-blurred close-ups of Gish.<sup>19</sup> It was also one of the first commercial films in the U.S. to be promoted successfully as high art.<sup>20</sup>

Although our attention is constantly being drawn to Gish, she is not playing a woman seen on women's terms or from a woman's point of view. Her role is reduced to the depiction of a Virgin, a "vision" of women often manipulated in male, or rather, patriarchal, art. Within the narrative structure, the figure of Lucy is a term or a marker in a male story about male concerns.

The critical question that remains unresolved for me as a feminist viewer is this: Where does Lucy's pathos, which affects me so strongly, derive from? Are my eyes constantly on Lucy in the way that a male viewer's would be, insofar as traditional feature films constantly have us look at woman as objects in stories told through men's eyes?<sup>21</sup> Do I or can I stay on the film's surface and admire it as anti-racist and/or as Art? Do I respond to the figure of Lucy primarily because I appreciate this virtuoso film role for an actress, one which demands a range from childlike ingenuousness to complete hysteria? By extension, do I admire more of Griffith's films for such roles and for women's acting in them?

Most students I have taught remember specific Griffith films in terms of "what happens" to the female lead and in terms of the actresses' performances. BROKEN BLOSSOMS is seemingly "about" Lucy's plight, her moment of love, and her murder. The surface emphasis on Lucy's story is enhanced both by Gish's acting and the close-ups of her face and glowing hair. Such an emphasis on the waif Lucy gives the film an appeal to both men and women. Although, for me, the device of Lucy's making a smile with her fingers

is repulsively saccharine, the way Gish captures Lucy's limited emotional experience and the way her figure is filmed seem so "right" for this sad tale. For example, Griffith brilliantly assigns Gish the prop of a doll to represent Lucy's awakening to her childhood, sexuality, and maternal emotion all at once, and then he maintains a visual emphasis on the child clinging to that doll while she is attacked in the closet. While seemingly fixed in a rigid stance, Gish can let her eyes, posture, or fluttering hands express a whole range of emotions, and when she is attacked in the closet, she can let her body totally respond to the hysteria of impending death.[22](#)

Gish draws us in and holds us, and our sympathy at the child's plight both pacifies our superego and assures us that such things happen only to poor waifs and not to us. The other drama, that of masculinity and of men's need to get a virgin, is enacted on a level of the film which I think many people can observe but which goes by relatively uncommented on either by the overt story line or by the intertitles. And on this level, the film leads us all to participate in Lucy's rape by her father and her seduction by the Chinese man, the seduction in fact of a child who has just been given her first doll.

The film depicts interracial love yet hides the ways it makes that love "safe." It protests male brutality yet draws us into male violence and child-abuse. I cannot speak for a Third World person's reaction to the film's ambiguous combination of anti-racism and racism. I do know that, as a feminist, it is my being drawn into cinematic depictions of this kind of sexual perversion that disturbs me the most. It seems a gauge of my own colonized mind.

Lucy's pathos draws me into identifying with a cinematic depiction of woman as victim.[23](#) On the one hand, as a viewer, I want to protect this girl as a motherless child. Her helplessness calls out to me. As a girl and also as a woman, I have both felt helplessness (even been addicted to it) and nurtured others from helplessness to independence (the teacher's role, the lover's role, the mothering role that I have learned in my female socialization).

On the other hand, BROKEN BLOSSOMS' patriarchal, extreme depiction of father-daughter relations also reflects my own internalized and eroticized fears of male authority, dominance, and control--fears that also derive from my girlhood in this culture. I have to ask myself: In what ways as a viewer do I "participate" in Lucy's brutalization and rape? I know how many levels of culture (from the structure of language to the structures of fiction to the structures of the economy) operate in a way that would encourage me to eroticize female submission.[24](#)

In her key work on the presentation of women in male pornography, Angela Carter compares BROKEN BLOSSOMS to de Sade's *Justine*:

"Sometimes this waif, as in Griffith's BROKEN BLOSSOMS, is as innocently erotic and as hideously martyred as Justine herself, and as a sexual icon, the abused waif allows the customer to have his cake and glut himself upon it, too. She could be as enticing in her vulnerability and ringleted prettiness as she was able but the audience knew all the time that the lovely child before them was a mature woman whom the fiction of her

childishness made taboo. The taboo against acknowledging her sexuality created the convention that the child could not arouse desire; if she did so, it was denied. A sentimental transformation turned the denial of lust into a kitsch admiration of the 'cute.'"<sup>25</sup>

Carter discussed the mechanism of denial in terms of male spectators' response to Gish's roles. I would also apply that mechanism to my own response. My response may include a denial of "lust"--i.e., my own erotic reaction to my preferred female stars. But more clearly, Gish's role as waif-woman both elicits my own Oedipal fears and fantasies and allows me to deny them. The extremity of Lucy's condition allows me to deny that there is an internalized, "masochistic" drama of the brutalized girl child that I, the mature woman, still carry around with me emotionally. Furthermore, Gish, acting the desired and abused girl, represents the vision I as a "good girl" had to have of my sexuality--it was there but denied, and I long thought that its destiny was to be possessed.<sup>26</sup>

BROKEN BLOSSOMS openly teaches that its configuration of male dominance/female submission is destructively perverse. Do woman viewers who identify strongly with Gish's role sense that BROKEN BLOSSOMS has artistically presented their own problems in such a way that it has brought sexual-political problems to the surface for conscious consideration? I suspect not. As a viewer, pathos has overwhelmed me. When I identify with women on the screen as victims, it is difficult to move away from "feeling" to a more active, self-aware response.

Even with this caveat, my response to BROKEN BLOSSOMS is ambiguous. I cannot help but admire it. In a visual style fully adequate to expressing the complex interrelations between romantic striving and male brutishness, the film offers us a symbolically complete, although schematized and condensed, representation of masculine options under capitalism. Like most bourgeois, patriarchal narrative art, it provides a social and superego "cover" for its viewers so that they can immerse themselves in its flow. Yet here the "cover" is so honorable and so exhaustive (high art, anti-racism, anti-child abuse, male idealism and tenderness pitted against brutishness, female pathos and admirable women's screen role) that, below its manifest content, BROKEN BLOSSOMS demystifies the romantic hero as a semi-paralyzed pursuer of unattainable ideals and creates a daring metaphor to describe the woman's screen role) that, below its manifest content, BROKEN BLOSSOMS demystifies the romantic hero as a semi-paralyzed pursuer of unattainable ideals and creates a daring metaphor to describe the patriarch's possessive role in the nuclear family in terms of incest.

## NOTES

1. How films assign characters recognizable traits and how connotations are "readable" in film because they are reinforced in the action and in the narrative development are two topics I deal with extensively in the following articles, where I apply the methodology of Roland Barthes' *S/Z* to film: "*S/Z* and RULES OF THE GAME," *Jump Cut*, Nos. 12-13 (Winter 1976-77); "Teaching the Comparative Analysis of Novels and Films," *Style*, 9 (Fall 1975). [back](#)Special Issue, May 1978. And Lillian Breslow Rubin in *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1976)

presents through interviews a poignant and telling analysis of the systematic deformation of emotional life in white working-class families in the United States. [back](#)*Star Acting* provides a good formal analysis of this sequence. [back](#)

23. For discussions of the adverse effects of presenting woman as victim in a portrait intended to elicit audience sympathy, see my article, "Disarming Rape" and Charles Kleinhans, "Seeing through Cinema Verite: WANDA and MARILYN TIMES FIVE," *Jump Cut*, No. 1 (May-June 1974). [back](#)

24. Ellen E. Morgan, "The Eroticization of Male Dominance and Female Submission," *University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies*, 2, No. 1 (September 1975). [back](#)

25. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 60. [back](#)

26. See my extended discussion of CELINE AND JULIE GO BOATING and that film's relation to female fantasies in "Subversive Fantasies," *Jump Cut*, No. 23/24 (Spring 1981). [back](#)